

AMERICAN CONSULATE

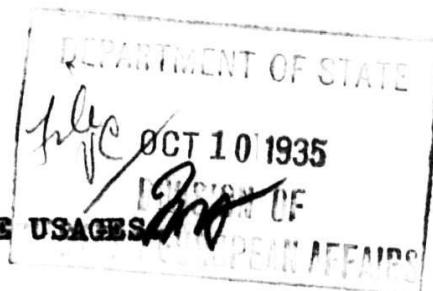
TRIPOLI LIBYA

September 15, 1935.

CONFIDENTIAL

Not for publication.

SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT INTERFERENCE IN NATIVE USAGES



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THE SECRETARY OF STATE

WASHINGTON

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I have the honor to inform the Department of two important recent measures of the Government of this colony in connection with the pursuit of its intention to raise the wellbeing of the indigenous population.

The more recent of the two, while more far-reaching in scope, is the simpler and will be first discussed.

On September 12, 1935, the Governor General of Libya, Air Marshal Italo Balbo, presided at a meeting of the Arab notables, both civil and religious, of the colony. It was decided at this meeting, apparently upon the proposal of the Governor General, to limit future marriages of Arab girls to those who had attained the age of fifteen years. This decision, it was said, did not contravene the Koran or good Mohammedan usage. It appears that the canons of the Mohammedan faith permit the marriage of females upon having reached puberty. This term is, of course, vague; particularly when one takes into account the variation of age at which puber-

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-ty occurs in the different latitudes. It is said that under this provision marriages have in the past been consummated between grown men and girls of ten and occasionally younger. While it seems to be the common belief that lechery in general has decreased in this colony since it has been under Italian control, possibly through the operation of economic factors, there would appear to have been enough continuance of the practice of child marriages to make itself noticeable to the Italian authorities, and has led to the present decision to set the age of puberty arbitrarily at the age of fifteen. This measure is said to have met with the unanimous approval of Arab ecclesiastic and civil authorities.

The other matter, while of less immediate importance, and certainly less wide in its application, is interesting as a manifestation of the extent to which control over indigenous customs is being exercised.

The Department may recall that, while stationed at Quebec, I made a speech before the Rotary Club of that city concerning the sect of the Aisawah which I had had an opportunity of studying more or less closely in Tunisia prior to my entry into the Service. The text of my talk as well as the subsequent newspaper clippings were submitted to the Department.

This sect which seems to be spread over the entire North African littoral is, like the "whirling" and "howling" dervishes found - formerly, at least, - farther to the East, a brotherhood of fanatical Mohammedans who, while insisting upon their allegiance to their faith, have introduced rites, customs, and practices frowned upon by

the orthodox. Their name is, properly speaking as indicated: "Aisawah", "Aisawiha", or some variation of this, allowing for differences in native dialect. In Tripolitania, however, they referred to themselves, and were referred to by the populace - an important point, I believe - as "Marabout", the specific Arab word meaning "saint". A saint may very well be a living person along the coast of North Africa.

The sect has mosques, sometimes called "zauias", separate from those of the orthodox Mohammedans, and there carry on services to the accompaniment of drums, wood-winds, the clapping of hands, a peculiar sort of loud, rhythmic breathing, and near-gymnastic movements of the body; this is continued until a religious frenzy having definite traces of auto-hypnosis is induced. One or more of the participants then separate from their fellows and, to the greater glory of Allah and His Prophet, indulge in various forms of mortification of the flesh such as walking on live coals, holding these in the pits of the arms, eating nails, cactus leaves and live scorpions, attaching fairly heavy weights to the skin of the chest with sharp metal hooks, running skewers through the cheeks and other parts of the body, and finally, rolling on vicious thorned cactus leaves. Less exaggerated practices seem to have been indulged in in Tripolitania than in Tunisia, at least this was true at the time of my visit here, but since this preceded by just a few days the issuance of the Governmental Decree of June 16, 1935, it is possible that moderation was practiced in order to forestall the issuance of the decree in question which positively forbids any indulgence in

/"fakirism",

"fakirism", as it is referred to, either in public or in private, under severe penalties, and requires the police authorities of the colony to take measures to prevent any future manifestations.

The article in the local press concerning the matter stated that the continuance of such practices were inconsistent with the development and progress of the Arabs, and stated further that in many instances the participants severely injured themselves. This was surprising since authorities with which I am familiar are unanimous in their declarations that no ill after effects are noted unless the practitioner has wilfully neglected the preliminary fasts, prayers, and purifications. It is, of course, chiefly on the basis of the lack of permanent injury to tissues or organs that the practices of the Aisawah enter into the realm of the occult. I recall speaking to several of the participants in Tunisia immediately after they had indulged in various serious mortifications of the flesh - during which no blood had flowed - and while they were sitting apart from the circle of participants, for there it was the custom for each man to withdraw when his turn had finished, and I was permitted to examine closely, and to pinch, the spots, noticeable only by a slight white discoloration, where sharp hooks and skewers had been a moment before. They merely said: "Pas faire mal, faire bon".

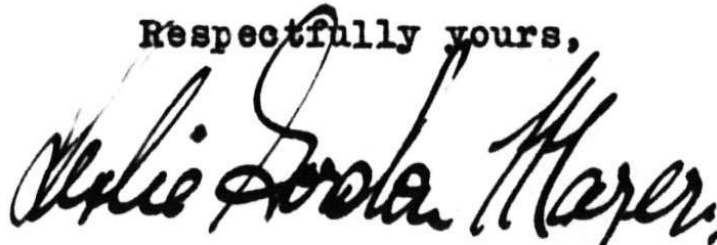
I would not be understood as criticizing the action of the Government of Libya in suppressing the practice. Whether the continuance would have been of sufficient value to science to permit practices which seem unnatural

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and barbaric is not for me to say.

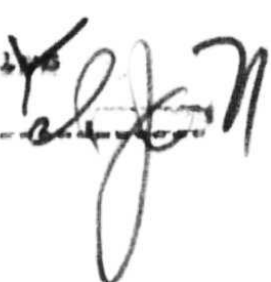
It should be mentioned that the Governor General, prior to issuing the decree, held a convocation of the principal Mohammedan religious leaders of the colony and it was announced in the press that they were unanimous in praising the proposed suppression of fakirism and in condemning the practice as not being in accordance with the Koran or with orthodox Mohammedanism. This is not surprising for the orthodox have always been enemies of the sect and the press does not indicate that representatives of the Aisawah were requested to state their views.

Respectfully yours,



Leslie Gordon Mayer,
American Vice Consul.

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